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Jeffrey A. Arp  
*Iowa State University*

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**Urban trenches: War poetry and the unreal city of the Great War in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land***

by

**Jeffrey Alan Arp**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:  
Laura Winkiel, Major Professor  
K.J. Gilchrist  
John Monroe

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa  
2005

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Graduate College  
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of  
  
Jeffrey Alan Arp  
  
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signature redacted for privacy

Major Professor

Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major Program

For my parents, Robert and Barbara Arp, who have given  
me so much that I shall never be able to repay them.

Thank you.

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

August, 1914: after years of crises, arms races, and two wars in the Balkans, Europe thrust itself into a continental war from which no clear victor would emerge after four years of horrific bloodbath and stalemate. The “Concert of Europe”<sup>1</sup> had been destroyed and nearly ten million Europeans had been killed by the war’s conclusion on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of November, 1918. The old empires of central and eastern Europe – Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire – would disappear, to be replaced by newly democratic republics and by new nation-states founded upon the right of self-rule instead of dynastic inheritance. The horror and brutality unleashed by the war had not been contained to the trenches, as families learned of what their sons, brothers, and fathers had endured: when a film of Verdun was shown in London, a packed audience fled the theater in terror. After the war, absent the censors, some men told of their experiences as others invoked them through disfigured faces and absent limbs. Mass graves and unidentified or absent corpses formed the basis of most of the memorials built to commemorate the dead. It had been a war to punish Serbia, to save Belgium, to fight for or against German *kultur* or a “nation of shopkeepers;” it had been fought to keep the world safe for democracy.

T.S. Eliot arrived in continental Europe in the summer of 1914 as a Harvard philosophy student preparing for his Ph.D.: he would spend the war as a banker in London, and would emerge in 1918 as a poet. He was never a soldier – America did not enter until

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<sup>1</sup> Operating as a sort of proto-League of Nations, the “Concert of Europe” comprised the six dominant European powers of the time: Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia. See David Stevenson’s *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York, 2004).

1917, and he only belatedly attempted to receive a commission in the United States Navy near the war's eventual conclusion a year later – but Eliot experienced the war: as a civilian in wartime London, as a man concerned with the fate of Western culture and history, and as a poet who wrote of a dead friend and a devastated land. *The Waste Land* has been considered the outpouring of a sensitive soul's grief and fear, or the general expression of the disillusionment and anxiety of an age, or as the elegy of a dead friend. The poem is all of these, but it is also more: it is, fundamentally, a war poem, written for a war that ushered in a new era where the old distinction between civilian and soldier became less meaningful. "If I have not seen the battle field," remarked Eliot in 1917, "I have seen other strange things" (*Letters* 189).

*The Waste Land* is the war poem of London. In *The Waste Land* we find the war's most dehumanizing images, of scattered bones and undead hordes, transposed upon the crowded streets and empty corners of London. Those who once swarmed across the desert face now shuffle across the Thames. In reading *The Waste Land* as a war poem, structural and thematic similarities can be found with a little-known poem by Ford Madox Ford, "In October, 1914 (Antwerp)," a poem with which Eliot himself was familiar, a poem Eliot believed to be of considerable quality. The exploration of these similarities constitutes the heart of this essay's reading of *The Waste Land* as war poem.

Like other poems of the Great War, *The Waste Land* sought not only to represent the experience of the War itself, but to also question its meaning. In "Anthem for Doomed Youth," Wilfred Owen asked: "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" In response to the Belgians' resistance to Germany, the narrator of Ford Madox Ford's "In October, 1914 (Antwerp)" can only wonder, with an awe approaching shock: "In the name of God / How

could they do it?" In the urban world of *The Waste Land*, this lamentation manifested itself in the "What shall we ever do?" of a distraught wife trapped in a lifeless marriage. The Great War brought all of Europe into crisis, threatening the dissolution of Western culture through four long years of brutal trench warfare and the postwar years of strife, economic and political crises, revolution, and civil wars. "In this most shell-shocked of poems," observes Nick Selby, "Eliot seems despairingly to ask: what now, after the war to end all wars?" (8). The exploration of this question constitutes the second major area of concentration in this essay.

### **Organization of this Study**

The main body of this essay is divided into six sections. The first section constitutes the literature review, focusing on the dominant areas of criticism of *The Waste Land* and their relation to the subject of the Great War. Divided into three sections, it discusses the original critical reception of *The Waste Land* as well as more recent biographical criticism that has focused on issues of Eliot's alleged personal prejudices and speculation on his sexuality. The second section, "Eliot and the Great War," discusses Eliot's attitude of the Great War and his experience of wartime and postwar London, primarily through his published letters. The third section, "Jean Verdenal: 'Phlebas the Physician'?", deals with the issue of Eliot's friendship with Jean Verdenal, a Frenchman who was killed at Gallipoli while serving as a medic in the French Army. There has been an appreciable amount of recent criticism regarding speculation that Eliot composed *The Waste Land*, at least in part, as an elegy for Verdenal, whose death at Gallipoli provides structure and content for several of the poem's passages.



The fourth section, "The 'Undone' Masses of London," deals with *The Waste Land's* obsession of the blurring of life and death within the image of the urban crowd; this examination leads into the section's second half, which is the exploration of the thematic and structural similarities between *The Waste Land* and a poem by Ford Madox Ford entitled "In October, 1914, (Antwerp)," a war poem which anticipates *The Waste Land's* merging of the landscape of the War with the urban space of London. "Personal Grief and Cultural Anxiety," the fifth section, explores the shared themes and anxieties of the narrators of *The Waste Land* and several war poems, such as the failure of traditional narratives and poetic forms to give meaning to the experience of the Great War and the desire to find a means of mourning the ruin and loss. To understand Eliot's conception of tradition and how it informs *The Waste Land*, this section also examines his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," focusing on its dialectical model of tradition and how this conception manifests itself in the poem. The sixth and final section, "The Unreal City," details how *The Waste Land's* merges the imagery of London with the imagery of the trench, blurring the line between civilian and combatant and presenting the city as a site of the War.

## I. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Early Readings: "the agonized outcry of a sensitive romanticist"

When *The Waste Land* was first published, the poem's many reviewers quickly settled upon its author's accompanying notes as the proper basis for interpreting what *The Waste Land* meant. The notes pointed most strongly towards the study of myth as exemplified in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Weston's *From Romance to Ritual*, most especially in the latter's focus on vegetation myth and Christianity. After the publication of Eliot's essay on Joyce's *Ulysees* – "Ulysees, Order, and Myth" – in 1923, many critics read *The Waste Land* with an eye on Eliot's assertion that Joyce's method of fusing mythical or classical forms with contemporary narratives was a method which artists after him would have to use. As Nick Selby notes, *The Waste Land*'s critical reception "was dominated for many years" by a view of the poem as "an exercise in the poetics of mythic composition" (13). The attraction of mythic readings was in their ability to give some semblance of structure and unity to the poem by connecting it to bodies of myth that critics could use to organize and make sense of the poem's disparate elements. The fragmented lamentations of multiple narrators could be unified in their associations with legends like that of the Fisher King and his desolate kingdom or the restoration of a stricken king in the legends of the Grail Quest. As a result, the first "generation" of criticism on the poem tended to focus upon reading the poem as "a mythic exploration of modern consciousness" (Selby 17).

Perhaps one of the most important and influential of these early reviews was Edmund Wilson's essay, "The Poetry of Drouth," published in the December, 1922, issue of *The Dial*. In his essay, Wilson made no mention of the war that had ended less than five years earlier, a war which had bled Europe for nearly just as long. Instead, he focused upon what he saw

(taking his cue from Eliot's notes) as the poem's use of mythic imagery and themes to reflect on the barren spirituality of the modern world. In "An Anatomy of Melancholy," Conrad Aiken, writing for *The New Republic*, did not mention the war either: he argued that the poem was incoherent and that it "must be taken [...] as a brilliant and kaleidoscopic confusion" (Grant 160). Louis Untermeyer's severe critique of the poem in January of 1923, "Disillusion vs. Dogma," in which he judged *The Waste Land* as "a pompous parade of erudition," makes a brief allusion to the conflict in stating that "the world" was searching for new beliefs (which he believed Eliot had failed to provide in the poem) because the world (i.e. Europe) "distrust[ed] the illusions which the last few years have destroyed" (Grant 151-153).

One of the few early reviews to specifically connect *The Waste Land* to the experience of the Great War was an essay by Helen McAfee published in the August, 1923, issue of *The Atlantic*. In her essay, "The Literature of Disillusion," McAfee noted that the poem was full "not only with a personal bitterness, but also with the bitterness of a man facing a world devastated by a war for a peace without ideals" (Grant 183). However, given the brevity of the review, this assessment was not pursued with any depth, and the connection between the war and the poem is left at the most general level: the poem, for McAfee, represents the "confusion and bitterness" of a postwar Europe that "no longer [can] see why [it] suffered" (183).

Due to the early criticism and reviews focusing so heavily on the poem's adaptation and use of mythic imagery and themes, critical readings of *The Waste Land* have, at times, tended to become exercises in recognizing and explicating its numerous allusions and quotations, to ultimately see the poem as the dense exercise of a greatly literary mind. A

*New York Tribune* review in May, 1923, referred to the poem as “the agonized outcry of a sensitive romanticist” (Grant 170), whereas John Crowe Ransom’s essay for *The New York Evening Post Literary Review* discussed *The Waste Land* in relation to its author and the process of creation within the minds and souls of authors. For such critics, the poem’s biographical elements were read as being intensely private, to the point perhaps of being cryptic.

As a result of such emphasis being placed on the poem as the personal metaphoric or mythic representation of cultural dissolution, *The Waste Land*’s direct representation of the Great War was often overlooked during its early reception. While the Great War was certainly understood to be connected to the poem, such connections were often left as background or context: the war was simply one of several sources of the modern European anxiety that had helped form the poem. It was acknowledged but not often discussed as part of those “last few years” that had undone so many of the West’s self-conception as a progressive and moral society.

### **Biographical Readings: Misogyny and Anti-Semitism**

Recent criticism has tended to deemphasize the mythic element of *The Waste Land* in favor of more complex and in-depth biographical readings of the poem. For Nick Selby, this change in focus, “towards critical methodologies that exploit details from Eliot’s biography and new theories about modernism,” has come about as the result of a new “postmodern readership” coming to grips with the poem (139). It has also been spurred by the greater access to information on Eliot’s personal life from biographies such as Peter Ackroyd’s and scholarly examinations of Eliot’s personal beliefs and prejudices. *The Waste Land*,

according to Selby, “is finally [being] seen as the product of profound personal and cultural trauma” (139).

This recent biographical emphasis has tended to focus upon Eliot’s relationship to his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood, and Eliot’s perceived anti-Semitism, as expressed in several of his poems as well as his (mostly later) critical essays. Lyndall Gordon’s biography, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, tends to view Eliot’s treatment of Vivienne – his remoteness, his seeming inability to deal with, and even repulsion of, her mental and physical problems, his eventual abandoning of her and her later commitment to a psychiatric institution – as being representational of a general revulsion against women on Eliot’s part. Gordon argues that Eliot’s dealings with Vivienne were symptomatic of a certain element of misogyny that he possessed, a misogyny that often manifested itself in Eliot’s poetry in connection to his anti-Semitism (104-105). Although Gordon is, at times, sympathetic with the apparent difficulties of being Vivienne Haigh-Wood’s husband, Eliot is still ultimately defined as being incapable of empathizing with the suffering of others (215). For Gordon, Eliot was incapable of seeing the marriage’s failure as primarily being *his* traumatic experience: “[Eliot] was not disposed to see the wrong he did a woman with whom he was not in love” (119). The portrayals of troubled marriages and relationships in *The Waste Land* have come to be seen as echoing the personal troubles Eliot himself dealt with during the poem’s composition.

Accusations against Eliot of anti-Semitism have become a prominent element of recent criticism of Eliot himself as well as of his poetry and critical writings. Critics such as Anthony Julius, Christopher Ricks, and Peter Scott have argued that Eliot’s modernist poetics cannot be divorced from a virulent anti-Semitism found in poems such as “Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar,” “Gerontion,” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales.”

This was an anti-Semitism, recent critics claim, that had been overlooked, not acknowledged, or apologized for by previous critics: Julius decries the number of books that “pretend [Eliot] had nothing to say about Jews” (38). While much of this criticism has focused on the images of Jews that arise in several of Eliot’s most well-known poems – the squatting landlord in “Gerontion,” the “Chicago Semite Viennese” of Bleistein, the murderously-pawed Rachel *née* Rabinovitch in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” – the lightning rod for these accusations has been Eliot’s comment, in his 1934 book *After Strange Gods*, that, for “reasons of race and religion,” it would be “undesirable” for any good Christian society to have too many “free-thinking Jews” (19-20). Eliot’s perceived prejudice is often connected to his support for the French writer Charles Maurras and his *l’Action Française*, a writer whose anti-Semitism was tied to his calls for renewed French nationalism.

### **Biographical Readings: “Un peu banquier” and Jean Verdenal**

Michael Levenson, in a 1999 essay, “Does *The Waste Land* Have a Politics?,” argues that the poem’s great struggle is not with the violence of the war itself but with the turmoil of its peace. One of Levenson’s main points is that John Maynard Keynes’ *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* should be considered as the major source and guide for *The Waste Land*’s “ghostly modality” of urban men and women leading pointless, ineffectual lives (4). In examining the manuscript of *The Waste Land*, Levenson argues that Eliot’s poem was born out of “the noisy, swarming [boom] town” of a postwar London “not conscious enough to know that it’s dead” (4). A passage found in the rough drafts of “The Fire Sermon” indicate, for Levenson, the poem’s parallel fear and desire to see the annihilation of the city:

London, the swarming life you kill and breed,  
 Huddled between the concrete and the sky;  
 London, your people is bound upon the wheel!  
 Phantasmal gnomes, burrowing in brick and stone and steel!

(qtd. in Levenson 2-3)

In *The Waste Land's* images of urban decay and destruction Levenson finds "a tone of perceptible relief that lives within the catastrophe" (3).

Eliot's experience as an employee for Lloyd's Bank during the war has become a focal point for several critics, including Levenson, Eleanor Cook, and others. Levenson insists that "we certainly misread both Eliot's modernity and his urbanity if we ignore his role as a practitioner of economics, working amid various subtle currencies" (1). Eliot took a job at the bank, working in the foreign languages section, in 1917, working there until he was hired by publisher Faber & Gwyer (later Faber & Faber) in 1925. Noting Eliot's steady rises in salary, from a starting £120 a year in 1917 to £600 by 1925, Gordon observes that Eliot "excelled" at his job, enjoying the relative stability and freedom that working as a bank clerk provided: it was a more reliable career than being the editor of a journal, and it allowed Eliot to produce only the work he wanted to create, rather than "churn out ephemeral copy" for the money (Gordon 165). For Levenson, Eliot negotiated the literary world of London as a banker managing capital: Eliot understood "the material conditions of success" and administered his critical and poetic reputation with a "banker's understanding of writing markets" (Levenson 1). Levenson pursues this economic metaphor in examining the "sexual economy" of *The Waste Land's* postwar London, "a fevered economy [...] where there is more money chasing more bodies" (8). The pub woman's admonition that "Others can pick

and choose if you can't" is connected to Keynes' argument that "the war has disclosed the possibility of consumption to all and the vanity of abstinence to many" (qtd. in Levenson 8).

Eliot's banking career did occasionally make its way directly into his poetry: in the light-hearted "Mélange Adultère de Tout" Eliot reminisces of his early life in London – "En Yorkshire, conférencier; / A Londres, un peu banquier" (5-6) – and the character of the "Smyrna merchant unshaven" in *The Waste Land* was based on a real person (and incident): B.C. Southam quotes John Peale Bishop's recollection that "Mr. Eugenides actually turned up at Lloyds with his pocket full of currants and asked Eliot to spend a weekend with him for no nice reasons" (qtd. in Southam 170).

The criticism that has perhaps examined the presence of the Great War within *The Waste Land* most intimately has been the recent focus on the controversial theory that the poem is an elegy by a male narrator for his dead lover killed in the War. The first critic to advance such a reading of *The Waste Land* was the scholar John Peter, who published an essay, entitled "A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*," in the July, 1952, volume of *Essays in Criticism*. In the essay, Peter argues that "the speaker [of the poem] has fallen completely [...] in love," that "[t]he object of this love was a young man who soon afterwards met his death," possibly by drowning, and that enough time had passed "for the speaker to have realized that [his lover's lost affection] is irreplaceable" (143). For Peter, *The Waste Land* was "a meditation upon this [loss], upon the speaker's stunned and horrified reactions to it, and on the [...] insupportable bleakness" which the world now presented to him (143).

Although Peter's original essay did not identify this speaker with Eliot, or provide a specific identity for the dead lover being mourned, the work was quickly attacked and



suppressed by Eliot when he learned of it: Peter himself was informed that Eliot had read the piece ““with amazement and disgust”” (qtd. in Miller 13). Eliot confided to a close friend that homosexuality ““does NOT happen to be my temperament”” (qtd. in Gordon 470). As a result of threatened legal action, original editions of the *Essays in Criticism* volume in which it appeared were recalled and destroyed, replaced with a new edition omitting the offending essay. This essay would be suppressed until after Eliot’s death, when Peter republished it, in expanded form, in 1969 (Miller 13). The additional material came in the form of a “Postscript” in which Peter moved beyond the generalizations of the original essay and specified the relationship mourned for in the poem as being one between Eliot and a friend, Jean Verdenal, whom he knew from the year he had spent in Paris in 1910 as a student. As it had been possible to consider such an interpretation of the poem without identifying Eliot specifically as the narrator in question, the poet’s extreme reaction – to not only express disgust at the reading but to actively silence it – has been read by some as a possible indication that Peter’s original essay had come too close to the truth of the matter.<sup>2</sup>

Such an interpretation of *The Waste Land* has come to be championed by other critics, most notably James E. Miller, Jr. In *T.S. Eliot’s Personal Waste Land*, Miller examines Eliot’s public relationship with his famous poem, noting in particular Eliot’s eventual denials that *The Waste Land* was anything more than a “grouse against life.” Miller sees such comments from Eliot as attempts to obscure the personal revelations contained within the poem and dissuade critics from probing *The Waste Land* in search of them. However, Miller argues, certain comments by Eliot – some unrelated to the poem or its criticism – infer the

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<sup>2</sup> It can also be argued that Eliot’s reaction is also compatible with the horror a “proper” heterosexual man of his prominence and conservatism would have expressed at such a public implication.

secret Miller believes Eliot to be hiding. In examining Eliot's introduction to Djuna Barnes' novel *Nightwood*, Miller highlights the praise Eliot gave for the book's transvestite character Dr. Matthew O'Connor and Eliot's summation of the book as an exploration of the individual and universal miseries of human experience (Miller 31). When Eliot wrote that "The sick man does not know what is wrong with him: he partly wants to know, and mostly wants to conceal the knowledge from himself" (*Nightwood* xv), Miller's response is to see the comment as being "on the verge of revelation" (Miller 31), presumably of either an actual homosexual relationship or of homoerotic feelings by Eliot for Verdenal (which may or may not have been mutual).

While this reading of *The Waste Land* has proven compelling for at least some critics, it still seeks to ultimately confine the meaning and presence the Great War has within the poem, by reducing it, to some degree, to being little more than a vehicle through which the narrator can introduce a coded elegy for an unspeakable love. The critic him or herself raises the issue of the Great War only long enough to get to their real interest: the subject of Eliot's possible homosexuality. The error of such readings is in the dismissal of how direct and immediate the presence of the Great War is within *The Waste Land*: while the poem functions as an elegy, it is also the expression of Eliot's own experience of the Great War. The death of a close friend such as Verdenal immersed Eliot into the War itself: Eliot's recorded references to Verdenal, in epitaphs and remembrances, are invariably linked to the location of his death at Gallipoli. Mythic readings of the poem acknowledge *The Waste Land* as expressing the postwar anxiety of Europe, and more modern biographical readings have focused on Eliot's connection to the conflict in both economic and sexual/personal terms, yet such readings stop short of understanding *The Waste Land* as a war poem itself, a direct

expression of the horror of the Great War that Eliot experienced in his unreal city of wartime London.

In *The Waste Land*, the trenches of the Great War have become a site of anxiety for the poem's urban narrators, dissolving the boundaries between the battlefield and the city, between the combatant and the civilian. In *The Waste Land*, the horrors and stress of the war and postwar periods turn the jostling London of the civilian world into the death-filled trench of the battlefields. As Paul Fussell observes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, "a work like *The Waste Land* appears much more profoundly a 'memory of the war' than one had thought" on initial reading:

Consider its archduke, its rats and canals and dead men, its focus on fear, its dusty trees, its conversation about demobilization, its spiritualist practitioners reminding us of those who preyed on relatives anxious to contact their dead boys, and not least its settings of blasted landscape and ruins, suggestive of what Guy Chapman recalls as 'the confluent acne of the waste land under the walls of Ypres.' (325-326)

Fussell quotes approvingly Francis Hope's belief that "all poetry written since 1918 is war poetry" (325).

In *'The Men of 1914': T.S. Eliot and Early Modernism*, Erik Svarny writes that to understand *The Waste Land* is to read it as the "evocation of the spectral atmosphere of post-war London" and its traumatized inhabitants (163). For Sandra Gilbert, *The Waste Land* is, like the poems of Owen and Sassoon, centered on the "antipastoral deathscape" of the trenches, where dead bodies dissolved into mud and barren landscape (184-185). The shock and horrors of the War left both combatants and civilians incapable of mourning the dead

through traditional poetic forms like elegies or returning to other traditional forms like the pastoral: combatants themselves could not separate their status as mourners for dead mates from the fact that they had been killers themselves, and civilians had to face the guilt, as Rudyard Kipling did, of being those who had sent their sons into the trenches when they had loyally supported the war effort (190). In addition, Gilbert notes, many civilians were faced with the War's disillusioning of a pre-war European sense of shared culture and heritage (190).

## II. ELIOT AND THE GREAT WAR

For Eliot, the four years of the Great War were not a distant event far removed from his daily life and private concerns. Finding himself in London as an American national, Eliot in 1914 was immediately confronted with the scope and nature of the conflict about to unfold. Living in Germany in preparation for continuing his doctorate program begun at Harvard, Eliot saw firsthand the mobilization of Germany. In a letter to his mother written on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August – after his safe arrival in London after the war's initial outbreak – Eliot wrote of not initially comprehending the seriousness of the crisis as it developed and spilled into war. He was surprised by England's entrance into the conflict with its declaration of war on August 4<sup>th</sup> (*Letters* 52). Boarded at a German university alongside other foreign nationals, Eliot noted the low morale of the French and Russian students; the latter, he observed, already aware that the German government would likely never let them return home (52).

At the university, Eliot had been in many ways initially separated or detached from the first effects of the crisis and subsequent outbreak of war, although he had been still aware of the general development of events. It was when he boarded a train that would take him from Marburg to Frankfurt, beginning his journey to England, that Eliot first directly encountered the new reality: "The trip to Frankfurt is ordinarily an hour and a half," Eliot recalled,

It took [us] five hours. Mobilization ended, but they were still on the lookout for bombs. There were soldiers on the train, too, reservists. I shall never forget one woman's face as she tried to wave goodbye. I could not see his face; he was in the next compartment. I am sure she had no hope of seeing him again. (*Letters* 53)

Recollecting this voyage to his mother, Eliot wrote of Germany's desire for American sympathy and alliance. He wrote also of the German papers and the arguments they had put forth, giving a first indication of his initial view of the war's causes, combatants, and to which side held his sympathies. "Germany," Eliot believed, "is animated by an intense spirit, but I don't see how she can possibly win" (*Letters* 54). He repeats for her one of the common slogans that had arisen in Germany during the crisis, commenting: "*Deutschland kaempft um das Existenz!*"<sup>3</sup> they say and they are right. *But I think it is better that Germany should go*" (54).

In a letter written to his brother Henry roughly two weeks later, either on the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 1914, Eliot stated his desire to see Germany beaten; yet, he remarks, "it is silly to hold up one's hands at German 'atrocities' and 'violations of neutrality'" (*Letters* 56). This is because, Eliot declared, Germany was justified in its violation of Belgian neutrality (as it is fighting for its very existence), just as the English were justified in honoring their treaty with Belgium. Eliot concluded the letter by writing that "It is not against German 'crimes', but against German 'civilisation' – all this system of officers and professors – that I protest" (56).

In a concurrent letter, dated the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, Eliot informed his cousin Eleanor Hinkley that while he had no interesting anecdotes of his own concerning the war, "the whole experience has been something which has left a very deep impression on me" (*Letters* 57). Having seen the propagandistic newspapers on both sides of the war, Eliot stated that he could not "adopt a wholly partisan attitude," although if one must choose sides he must come down against the Germans (57-58). He also referenced, for the first time, the involvement of

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<sup>3</sup> Translation: "Germany is fighting for her existence!" (italics are in the original)

friends in the conflict: "I know that men I have known, including one of my best friends, must be fighting each other" (58). The letter's tone betrayed, somewhat, his earlier convictions concerning the necessity of Germany's defeat. When he states that he has been to some of the towns already located in the battle zones by this point, his voice seems filled with the "deep impression" he had alluded to, a quiet sigh at the losses the war had already brought and was guaranteed to continue bringing in the foreseeable future.

As quickly as Eliot's apparent early support for the war gave way to a passive lament, it may have just as quickly turned to a more active disdain. In a letter to Conrad Aiken sent at the end of September, 1914, Eliot included a "war poem" he claims as having been written for an unnamed \$100 prize. It is a short poem, entitled "UP BOYS AND AT 'EM!":

*Now while our heroes were at sea*

*They pass'd a German warship.*

*The captain pac'd the quarterdeck*

*Parading in his corset.*

*What ho! they cry'd, we'll sink your ship!*

*And so they up and sink'd her.*

*But the cabin boy was sav'd alive*

*And bugger'd, in the sphincter. (Letters 59)*

The poem was, Eliot claimed, "declined by several publishers on the ground that it paid too great a tribute to the charms of German youth to be acceptable to the English public" (59). Eliot's response to the editors, he informed Aiken, was to acknowledge the objection but argue that the scene should "be regarded as a punitive measure, and to show the readiness and devotion to duty of the British seaman" (59).

The poem was part of a cycle of poetry Eliot wrote and disseminated amongst a small group of friends, a cycle commonly referred to as the “King Bolo”/“Columbo” poems. Gabrielle McIntire has argued that the poems “play recklessly on prohibitions, offering a satirical poetics of desire and memory whose comic edge is always in danger of collapsing” (286). The poems are noteworthy for their obscenity, and one may be tempted to read such a poem such as “UP BOYS AND AT ‘EM!” as an exercise in black humor or as a “dirty” or “bawdry” poem shared informally between friends, rather than as a serious critique of the war. As McIntire notes, however, Eliot’s repeated attempts to have the poems published, and the fact that Eliot wrote them over almost the entire course of his life, both indicate that “we cannot simply dismiss them as ‘mere’ juvenilia” (286).

One can, in fact, read behind the surface humor something of an appreciable rejection of the war, or at least of the use of heroic imagery and narrative in describing the war, in its sing-songy nature (it was, Eliot claimed, written to the tune of “C. Columbo lived in Spain”), in the poem’s noticeable mockery of sailors – especially in the image constructed of the captain as well as the simplistic chorus lines voiced by “our heroes” – and in the taboo subject of its final lines. We can see this poem as an opening dissent against what might be considered the heroism expressed in the early poetry produced by (and for) the Great War, the kind exemplified by works such as *In Flanders Field*. It was a kind of poetry that, for Eliot, came from within his own family.

Eliot’s views on the war would have been complicated by those of his mother, Charlotte C. Eliot. From the beginning of the war, Charlotte called for America to fight on behalf of Britain, writing “urgent newspaper appeals” which were published in major newspapers to arouse a still-neutral nation (Gordon 137). She would eventually become, as



David Perkins lists her in *A History of Modern Poetry*, one of the American “Genteel Poets,” who wrote pro-war verse in the years before America entered the war (269-270). She became publically well-known for her “Crusaders – A War Song,” published by the *Boston Herald* in 1917 (270). It is not apparent, from the writings between Eliot and his mother collected in the first volume of his *Letters*, to what degree they openly discussed or argued the nature (or rightness) of the conflict, or of her poetry. When Eliot spoke of the war to her, it was usually in regard to those friends or family members of his that were involved as combatants, or in regards to the difficulties the war had come to impose on the civilian populace of London. He was likely, however, to have been quite aware of her early support for American involvement in the conflict (and belief in the rightness of the British and French cause that had led to such support).

If Eliot kept silent in the presence of his mother, he did not fail to register his annoyance with the American view of the war once the United States finally entered the conflict. In a letter from April, 1918, Eliot wrote to Eleanor Hinkley that “in England the sentimental heroic phase is gone [and] there are very few people who have been able quite to preserve [their old] values” (*Letters* 227). In a letter to his mother that same month, Eliot comments on the American newspapers she has sent him, stating that

Judging from [them], the war seems to have affected the country not very seriously yet. I don’t mean that it is not the chief subject of interest, but that it is *simply* the chief subject of interest, and not the obsessing nightmare that it is to Europe. And we can’t make you realise three thousand miles away all that that means. Even with all your privations and difficulties. Your papers talk about the “fight for civilisation”; do they realise either what civilisation means

or what the fight for it means? We are all immeasurably and irremediably altered over here by the last three years. (230)

A year earlier, in a letter to his father dated the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, 1917, Eliot wrote that the growing “war *enthusiasm*” (italics his) of America seemed “a bit unreal” (183). He tells his father that he sees the war “partly through the eyes of men who have been and returned” (183). He elaborated on this comment in a letter he wrote a month later, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July, to his cousin Eleanor:

Life moves so rapidly over here that one never hears twice of the same person as being in the same place or doing quite the same thing. It is either killed or wounded, or fever, or going to gaol, or being let out of gaol, or being tried, or summoned before a tribunal of some kind. I have been living in one of Dostoevsky’s novels, you see, not in one of Jane Austen’s. If I have not seen the battle field, I have seen other strange things, and I have signed a cheque for two hundred thousand pounds while bombs fell about me. I have dined with a princess and with a man who expected two years hard labour; and it all seems like a dream. (189)

As the war dragged on, Eliot, who felt the war so privately and intensely, sank into a kind of existential gloom by the end of 1917, a year which had brought a mutiny within the French army requiring brutal repression, the disaster of the Third Battle of Ypres (resulting in over 700,000 combined casualties from both sides), and the collapse of the Russian Tsar with the Bolshevik revolution, bringing with it a collapse of the Eastern Front which threatened to allow Germany to finally assault the Western Front with her full effort. The year had also brought the opening waves of the Spanish Influenza epidemic that would go on to take more

lives than the war itself. In a letter to his mother dated the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, 1917, Eliot wrote that "it is a good thing to be so busy that one cannot take time to worry much about the present condition of the world and the future of civilization" (*Letters* 199). To his father on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, Eliot noted that "everyone's individual lives are so swallowed up in the one great tragedy, that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions, and such as one has seem so unimportant" (214). By March of 1918, Eliot's melancholia leaves him to remark that "Everything looks more black and dismal than ever, I think. The whole world simply lives from day to day" (221).

While Eliot, like the old man of "Gerontion," may have never fought in the war, he had still come to experience battle itself through those who had. Throughout his letters, one finds Eliot concerned with the situations of friends and family members serving in the war. In addition to his classmates from Harvard as well as those he met in France and Germany from his studies abroad prior to the war, to name just a few of Eliot's personal connections to the battlefield would include his brother-in-law Maurice Haigh-Wood; Martin Armstrong, a private in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Artists Rifles (*Letters* 59); Francis Thwig, a Harvard classmate who had become a naturalized British citizen and eventually a captain in the Coldstream Guards (62); Oxford classmates Frederick Clare Hawkes and John Legge Bulmer, the latter presumed killed in action in France in May, 1917 (73); George Parker, a cousin of Eliot who joined when the US entered the war (174); and the husband of Eliot's typist, a captain in the regular army (190). In addition, he would lose at least one former instructor, Alain-Fournier Rivière, Eliot's French language and literature instructor in 1910 when he spent a year in Paris for his studies (Gordon 51). Such connections drew Eliot intimately close to the War, but an even stronger connection would draw the trenches of the Great War

into the unreal city of *The Waste Land*: Eliot's close and much speculated friendship with a Frenchman who would die in the Allied Power's failed assault at Gallipoli.

### III. JEAN VERDENAL: "PHLEBAS THE PHYSICIAN"?

#### "Mort Aux Dardanelles"

Perhaps the most intimate connection Eliot had to the war, however, was in his close friend Jean Verdenal, who lost his life fighting in the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915 and to whom Eliot dedicated his first book of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations*. Eliot had first met Verdenal in 1910, when both were lodged in the same pension in Paris (Gordon 52). Verdenal was two years younger than Eliot, a medical student who was the son of a doctor, and connected with Eliot over their shared philosophical and literary interests, most prominently Laforgue (52). After Eliot left Paris, they continued their friendship through letters. As Lyndall Gordon writes,

These letters reflect Eliot's capacity for friendship without the bravado he went in for with buddies like [Conrad] Aiken: his new friend was devoid of the ostentatious masculinity American men felt compelled to construct; his unaffected seriousness was charming. (53)

As has already been alluded to, much has been made of Eliot's relationship with Verdenal and its association with certain of Eliot's poems, most prominent among them *The Waste Land*. In particular, the two scenes most often discussed are the scene featuring the hyacinth girl in "The Burial of the Dead," and the entire section of "Death By Water" (i.e. the scene of "Phlebas the Phoenician"). Focus on these two passages has arisen due to both the length and centrality of both sections within the larger narrative(s) of *The Waste Land* as well as what some critics consider to be allusions within them that support such a reading. The connection between Verdenal and the hyacinth girl, for example, may be hinted at in a comment Eliot made in the April, 1934, edition of *The Criterion*. In a review of Henri

Massis' *Evocations*, Eliot made mention of Verdental when he spoke sentimentally of the "memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (as far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli" (*The Criterion* 452). The scene evoked by this comment, of a late afternoon in a garden and the noted presence of flowers, echoes for many the similar setting of the hyacinth girl's passage in *The Waste Land*.

Eliot felt Verdental's death intensely. Eliot produced several dedications mentioning Verdental: initially, Eliot dedicated his 1917 collection of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, to Verdental with the simple line "To Jean Verdental / 1889-1915." In 1925, when the collection was reprinted as part of *Poems: 1909-1925*, Eliot kept this dedication at the beginning of the Prufrock section, adding to it the line "*mort aux Dardanelles*" and an epigraph from Canto XXI of Dante's *Purgatorio*:

Or puoi, la quantitate

Comprender dell' amour ch'a te mi scalda,

Quando dismento nostra vanitate

Trattando l'ombre come cosa salda. (133-136)<sup>4</sup>

The dedication to Verdental itself, especially in its latter form, has also been the focus of critical inquiry regarding Verdental's connection to *The Waste Land*. The complete circumstances of Verdental's death are not entirely known, but several details can be gleaned from the official records: the details in a citation for heroism dated the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1915, indicate Verdental, a medic in the French army, likely participated in the First Battle of

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<sup>4</sup> Translation (by James E. Miller, Jr): "Now you are able to comprehend the quantity of love that warms me toward you, / When I forget our emptiness / Treating shades as if they were solid." (Miller 18)

Krithia (an Allied assault on Turkish positions) on April 28<sup>th</sup> and its immediate aftermath (Childs 141-142). On May 1<sup>st</sup>, the Turks launched their own assault, and it was the next day, during the Allied counter-attack, that Verdenal's death was recorded. The official wording reads: "Killed by the enemy on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1915 in the Dardanelles" (qtd. in Childs 142).

Due to the conditions surrounding Verdenal's death – the exact nature of which was unclear to Eliot for an unknown period of time – the phrase "*mort aux Dardanelles*" has been taken by many critics as likely alluding to a possibly belief by Eliot that Verdenal had drowned at sea instead of being killed on the beaches of Gallipoli. Such a belief may account for the setting and content of the "Death by Water" section of *The Waste Land*, where a once-handsome sailor has been reduced to silent bones at the bottom of an empty sea. It is also possible that Eliot may have been told of another fate: in addition to Verdenal's death certificate mentioning the Dardanelles, historical records indicate that the French had suffered so many casualties that the grave-diggers, challenged by the harsh conditions and hard ground of Gallipoli, eventually resorted to disposing some of the dead by dropping them off the cliffs into the Dardanelles; Verdenal's body may have been one of those disposed in such a manner (Childs 142).

Verdenal's death, likely while tending to the wounded, may also have an echo in Tiresias' monologue in "The Fire Sermon." In an aside, Tiresias recounts being under the wall at Thebes and walking in Hades amongst "the lowest of the dead" (245-246). Pinned down on the high cliffs of Gallipoli, Verdenal too – as both medic and casualty – would have walked amongst the dead in a battle one observer quoted as "hell let loose upon [the] earth" (qtd. in Childs 142).

### Anzacs in London: Stetson and Mrs. Porter

Another critic, Donald J. Childs, while dismissing the necessity of believing the Verdenal-Eliot relationship to be homosexual in nature, has also read *The Waste Land* as a eulogy for Verdenal. In his 1998 essay, "Stetson in *The Waste Land*," Childs argues that Verdenal is the presence behind the "Stetson" passage in "The Burial of the Dead" and the Sweeney/Mrs. Porter passage in "The Fire Sermon." For Childs, the controlling subject behind both passages is the ANZAC<sup>5</sup> forces that Verdenal served with at Gallipoli. In determining why Eliot chose the name "Stetson" for a character in "The Burial of the Dead," Childs discovered that during the Great War, the term, especially in Britain, was used to refer to the "famous felt hat worn by Australian and New Zealand soldiers" (133-134). In addition, the hat was so unique and identifiable that it became the dominant image of the ANZAC soldier in wartime and postwar London (135). For Childs, the name "Stetson" was a metonymic device: the narrator and the man he is calling after with his shout of "Stetson!" were both (ex-) ANZAC soldiers (134), the "ships at Mylae" an allusion to the Gallipoli invasion (qtd. in Childs 140, from Miller 77).

The connection of Stetson to Mrs. Porter is found in the latter's origin in a ribald song sung by ANZAC troops. In the song, the figure of "Mrs. Porter" was a reference to (or a "legend" based upon) an owner of a brothel in Cairo, Egypt, that was well-known to the soldiers (Childs 137). "Mrs. Porter was a legendary figure," writes Childs, "not because of any particularly prodigious sexual ability, but because of the likelihood [of catching] venereal disease" from her and her prostitutes (137). One version of this song went:

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<sup>5</sup> Australian and New Zealand Army Corps



O the moon shines bright on Mrs. Porter

And on the daughter

Of Mrs. Porter.

They wash their feet in soda water

And so they oughter

To keep them clean. (qtd. in Childs 137)

Childs charges Eliot with being coy in regards to the "Notes" he wrote for *The Waste Land*, in which he claimed to know it only as an Australian camp song "reported" to him from Sydney, Australia (Childs 136-137; see also note 199 of Eliot's "Notes").

For Childs, this song serves as the beginning point for an intricate string of associations: "In Eliot's imagination," he writes, "the song about Mrs. Porter signifies an Australian soldier, which in turn signifies Gallipoli" (138). Gallipoli, in turn, would recall the ANZAC soldiers and the death of his friend, for "Gallipoli is Eliot's way of referring to Jean Verdenal" (140). Child's reasoning for this line of associations lies in the image of the ANZAC troops that had captured the imaginations of the English during and after the war. During the Gallipoli campaign, English newspapers were filled with reports of their "incredible fortitude, ingenuity, and heroism" (139). On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1916, London celebrated the first anniversary of Gallipoli with a parade of 2,000 ANZAC troops that took the soldiers throughout London: "across Waterloo Bridge, along the Strand to Charing Cross, and then along Whitehall to Westminster Abbey" (139). Massive crowds lined the parade route, and "the songs of the soldiers were caught up and repeated" (qtd. in Childs 139).

The same celebration in 1919 (April 25<sup>th</sup> had officially become Anzac Day by then) was even bigger as it was the last celebration featuring actual ANZAC troops who were

scheduled to soon return home (Childs 144). Childs quotes a newspaper commentary on the parade which noted in particular the ““extraordinarily romantic headdress”” of the ANZAC troops (qtd. in Childs 144). The parade marched throughout London, including Cornhill where Eliot’s then-employer, the Colonial and Foreign Department of Lloyd’s Bank, was located; “given the disruption to business in the area caused by [the parade],” Childs writes, it is likely that Eliot “knew of it or watched it himself” (144-145).

For Childs, then, Eliot made use of allusions to the ANZAC troops as a way of recalling the death of Jean Verdenal. What Childs’ reading shares with many other critics on this issue, including those mentioned earlier, is that Verdenal’s presence in *The Waste Land* is often an ephemeral one: if Verdenal does exist in the poem, he can only be found behind masks and allusion; the actual content of the poem is a code which the reader must decipher in order to uncover its true subject. Unfortunately, little is known of the exact nature of the two men’s relationship: when James E. Miller, Jr. contacted Harvard (which held the letters in question at the time) and then Valerie Eliot regarding the then-unpublished<sup>6</sup> letters between Verdenal and Eliot, he was informed that none of Eliot’s letters to Verdenal were known to still exist. As a result of such a dearth of information, it has become necessary to speculate on the nature of the friendship for critics interested in the possible presence of Verdenal in Eliot’s poetry. As might be expected, the eventual publishing of several of Eliot’s letters to Verdenal has neither proved nor disproved the critics’ claims.

While the links they have uncovered, and the interpretive readings they’ve subsequently created, are tenuous or circumstantial enough to keep one from assuming their

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<sup>6</sup> Seven letters, dated from July 1911 to December 1912 and all written from Verdenal to Eliot, were eventually published in *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume One: 1898-1922* (Harcourt: New York).

validity too strongly, they tend to be quite convincing at the most general level – that Eliot, likely knowingly, worked references to his lost friend into *The Waste Land*, allowing the poem to become, at least in part, an elegy for someone who had been dear to him. Such a reading, however, also indicates that Verdenal's presence in the poem moves beyond the reflecting memories of elegy, placing us directly at the battlefield itself: as Scott Herring observes, if Eliot had “‘set out specifically to describe a Gallipoli dugout, [he] could scarcely have chosen better words than ‘mudcracked houses’ from which ‘red sullen faces sneer and snarl’” (qtd. in Gilbert 197). Similarly, a narrator's lament that “‘There is not even silence in the mountains / But dry sterile thunder without rain’ proves to have been an all too accurate conjecture in the context of the ceaseless artillery barrages mounted by the Turks” (qtd. in Gilbert 197).

Regardless of the nature of the relationship between Eliot and Jean Verdenal, it is clear that, through Verdenal, Eliot experienced directly for himself two of the most iconic experiences that the soldiers of the Great War underwent themselves: the blurring of the lines between the living and the dead, and the experience of death as a vague, haunting, absence of flesh. The question regarding the exact fate of Verdenal's remains – mixed in with the mud of Gallipoli, or settling upon the silent bottom of the Dardanelles – and Eliot's revisioning of his dedication to Verdenal point towards the anxiety Eliot must have felt from Verdenal's missing corpse, which had in turn made the exact nature of his death unknowable. It is this same anxiety that informs the specter of the crowds that fill *The Waste Land's* urban London, the undone many hovering between life and death.

#### IV. THE "UNDONE" MASSES OF LONDON

##### "We who were living are now dying"

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell quotes a passage from Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography*:

After seeing troop trains departing from Waterloo, I used to have strange visions of London as a place of unreality. I used in imagination to see the bridges collapse and sink, and the whole great city vanish like a morning mist.

Its inhabitants began to seem like hallucinations. (qtd. in Fussell 326)

Fussell interprets the image of the masses in *The Waste Land* (whose crowd imagery Russell claims to have inspired Eliot to put in the poem) as being not only London civilians but "the masses of reinforcements going from England daily to the line" (326). In both the trench and the city, the image of the crowd, of individuals (and individual bodies) blurred into a collective, vague but unified presence, becomes one of the representative images of the war itself, of its brutal assault on the integrity of both the minds and bodies of the men who fought it. We see such blurring in much of the work of war poets such as Wilfred Owen: in his perhaps most famous poem, "Dulce Et Decorum Est," Owen spoke of men marching asleep, of wagons filling with the bodies of the dead; the narrator of "Strange Meeting" comes upon an underworld filled with "encumbered sleepers" who were "[t]oo fast in thought or death to be bestirred" (4-5); and in "Mental Cases," the narrator remarks: "[t]hese are men whose minds the Dead have ravished" (10).

The image of the crowd becomes the poem's intersection between the huddled dead and dying of the trenches and the teeming masses of the city. The undead masses of the city echoing both the living and the dead of the battlefield: for soldiers of the Great War, the

constant threat of being buried alive was their greatest fear, an indication towards how disturbingly vague and imprecise the boundary between living and dead could be in the trenches (Booth 61). The parallel fear of *The Waste Land's* London is the emptiness of modern life as exemplified by indifferent sexual encounters and the dissolution of familial and social relationships: a bar patron's lamentation of the side effects of an abortion in "A Game of Chess," a narrator mourning the death of his king-father in "The Fire Sermon" (echoing a similar death in *The Tempest*), another narrator lamenting how another's heart could "have responded / Gaily [...] beating obedient / To controlling hands" (420-422). Life has become as empty as death amongst the fallen towers of London: in the crowds of *The Waste Land* we see the tired shuffling of bodies over London Bridge into a city permeated by buried corpses, disinterred bones, and the constant presence of vermin. Yet, so powerful has the idea of the crowd become within the poem that its absence can spark an equal anxiety, as when a narrator in "The Fire Sermon" laments his desolation in the empty, littered wake of a youthful party that has ended.

As stated, *The Waste Land's* barren domestic worlds echoed the fears soldiers had of becoming trapped between the blurred states of living and dead. Such fears arose not only from the soldiers' natural fear of death, but also from the effects of the war's horrifically modern weaponry: machine guns, gas attacks, flamethrowers, and most especially its heavy artillery. The increase in range and power of artillery not only gave armies the power to kill indiscriminately over long ranges, it turned the nominally protective earth into a source of danger itself:

At the front, land was treacherous; dirt was not a reliable surface across which one could move. Instead, it was liable to become mud or quicksand or water

into which you could be sucked or trapped; it represented potential drowning, suffocation, immobilization. Nor did dirt remain underfoot. Shells made it explode, fly, or fall – turning it into precipitation, into a weapon, into a grave that could literally descend upon you at any moment. (Booth 61)

This blurring of life and death was experienced not only by the soldiers themselves, but also by families, communities, and the general public, all of which routinely experienced the unsettling nature of life and death at the front through the official, journalistic, and private notifications of their soldiers' fates. Some pronounced dead, such as Robert Graves, were later revealed to be alive, while others thought to be living turned up dead, and others who were missing simply never returned (Booth 61).

The exact cause or nature of death could also be unknown, as Eliot's attempts to learn the exact details of Verdun's fate illustrated. In his poem "S.I.W.," Wilfred Owen used the need for civilians to be comforted by soldiers, and the civilians' resulting ignorance of the true nature of the front, to draw a cynical portrayal of a soldier, Tim, whose betrayal of his family's patriotism through a common form of trench suicide (shooting oneself in the mouth with one's rifle) is masked by a letter home, a letter that assures his family that "'Tim died smiling'" (38). After the war, the civilian experience of the Great War as a "corpseless" war that returned few bodies, and left the fates of many others to be forever unknown, was most often memorialized in the form of the cenotaph, a structure built to honor the dead absent their actual bodies (Booth 33).

In *The Waste Land*, this ambiguity between life and death can be found in the laments of narrators who are "neither / Living nor dead" (lines 39-40), who once "were living" but now are dying, whose acquaintances too are caught between life and death (lines 328-330).

Michael Levenson, in *A Genealogy of Modernism*, argues that *The Waste Land's* famous opening seven lines are spoken by an undead corpse: in the opening narrator's focus upon lilacs blooming up from the earth, on "spring rain" mixing with "dull roots" beneath the earth, and the narrator being kept warm by winter's snowy blankets, Levenson argues that the narrator's point of view is "of someone (or some thing) that is buried" (172). The poem's opening, then, is centered on the ambiguity of a corpse observing the passing seasons from beneath the earth. For Levenson, the title of the opening section, "The Burial of the Dead," is an ironic one, for those who are being buried are in fact still alive, however slightly (172). Levenson also reminds us that the *The Waste Land's* rough drafts were filled with additional scenes of men or their bodies seemingly caught in between life and death that were later cut; the abundance of these scenes pointing towards how dominant this theme must have been in the poem's creation (173-174).

### **"There is a great crowd": From Charing Cross to Saint Mary Woolnoth**

In responding to this newly ambiguous nature to death that the war had created, and to the pervasive, haunting nature of the war's deaths upon its military and civilian survivors, Eliot may have knowingly or unknowingly been influenced by a war poem with which he was certainly familiar. In the November, 1917, issue of *The Egoist*, Eliot reviewed Harriet Monroe's *The New Poetry: An Anthology*, a book which contained a poem by Ford Madox Ford entitled "In October, 1914 (Antwerp)." In his review, Eliot referred to the poem as "the only good poem [I've] met with on the subject of [the] war" (*The Egoist* 151). The poem, divided into six sections, focuses upon the German violation of Belgian neutrality which began the war on the Western Front in August of 1914. The poem, which opens with an

extended meditation on the horror of the Belgian sacrifice, moves from images of Belgium's ravished fields and cities to a bleak wartime London, where Belgian refugees find their way to the Charing Cross train station. In doing so, it – much like *The Waste Land* would five years later – blends images of the soldier and the civilian, the battlefield and the city, and brings into question the relationship between postwar Europe and its prewar cultural traditions.

The poem shares with *The Waste Land* a sense of death as the dominant, constant presence of the war, a presence that is not contained solely within the battlefields and the trenches, but spreads across all of Belgium and across the Channel into London as Belgian refugees flee the German invaders. This change in location, from the battlefield to the city, to London in particular, is also found in *The Waste Land's* use of both urban and rural or battlefield imagery and its fusion of the two. Both poems also share, perhaps most importantly, the presence of narrators who are paralyzed by the worlds they see and experience.

In the poem's opening, the narrator expresses a disbelief in the sacrifice and cost Belgium willingly paid in its resistance to the Germans, opening with the repeated question: "In the name of God / How could they do it?" (9-10, 28). Section II develops the narrator's disbelief:

For there is no new thing under the sun,  
Only this uncomely man with a smoking gun  
In the gloom...  
What the devil will he gain by it? (29-32)



Unlike in more traditional (heroic) war poetry, Ford depicts his “hero” – this nameless Belgian man – as ugly. He recalls the Belgian soldiers’ pre-war professions as miners with “the appearances of clods” (11-17). His image of a nameless Belgian hero appears several times throughout the poem; the initial two locating him on the battlefield, first as the aforementioned “uncomely man” digging in the mud and rain, awaiting his “doom” (30-34), and again as

...this Belgian man in his ugly tunic,  
His ugly round cap, shooting on, in a sort of obsession,  
Overspreading his miserable land,  
Standing with his wet gun in his hand... (43-46)

In both appearances, this lone, individual man is presented as a doomed figure shrouded by the mud and the rain, as if the land he seeks to defend in turn actively seeks to become his grave. After the first appearance, his “doom” is expected but has not yet actually arrived (34-37); after the second appearance, it is achieved:

Doom!  
He finds that in a sudden scrimmage  
And lies, an unsightly lump on the sodden grass...  
An image that shall take long to pass! (47-50)

Although Ford does not completely break apart the bodies of these Belgian men, his imagery blends them into the ravaged landscape of the war, imagery echoed by Eliot’s *The Waste Land* when it speaks of “White bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret” (193-194).

Like *The Waste Land*, Ford's poem concerns itself with the inadequacy of heroic tradition to give meaning to the war. In section III, Ford attempts to connect the desperate heroism of the Belgians to the great heroic legends of European culture:

For the white-limbed heroes of Hellas ride by upon their horses

Forever through our brains.

The heroes of Cressy ride by upon their stallions;

And battalions and battalions and battalions –

The Old Guard, the Young Guard, the men of Minden and of Waterloo...

(51-55)

Emphasizing a wished-for endurance in these legends with line 52, a heavy weight added to them is attempted by the repetition of "battalions" in line 54 and its suggestion of the incalculable number of such heroic armies from which to draw both comparison and strength. Both lines, however, reveal the inadequacy of tradition. Ford follows this section with one that subtly reworks the wording of line 52:

And the small man with the large paunch,

And the grey coat, and the large hat, and the hands behind the back,

Watches them pass

In our minds for ever... (58-61)

Although the wording remains similar, the introduction of the ambiguous "pass" destabilizes the passage: does the poem's narrator still champion these legends as enduring, or has he acknowledged that they may have indeed "passed" (left) us "for ever"? The stance of the "small man" observing these ghostly maneuvers, while perhaps a traditional military pose in appearance, also happens to be a passive one: he is an observer watching what may be the

dying flicker of heroic legend in the Western tradition, himself unable to act as he witnesses the failure of European military traditions to give meaning to the sacrifice and experience of the Great War. The repetition of “battalions” also produces a subtle derivation or questioning: among the lists of heroic past armies, it stands out as the only generic line, absent any famous name or humanizing image, a generality which the repetition reinforces, echoing the urban crowds in both the poem’s ending as well as in *The Waste Land*’s London.

What ultimately defeats this heroic passage, however, is the section’s ending. The narrator is unable to move beyond the dehumanizing images of the dead as “unsightly lump[s] on the sodden grass.” The tone is macabre and ironic, tinged with the shock of one trying to find meaning in the deaths of those who had sacrificed themselves to defend Belgium against the overwhelming forces of the German invaders:

But that clutter of sodden corses<sup>7</sup>

On the sodden Belgian grass –

That is a strange new beauty. (62-64)

The narrator’s remark, an observation which indicates his inability to fully adjust to this new reality, this new “beauty,” ends a section that had begun with images of the “white-limbed heroes of Hellas” and the “heroes of Cressy.” It is an indication of the inability to articulate the experience of the Great War in traditional terms; as Modris Eksteins writes in *Rites of Spring*:

Traditional language and vocabulary were grossly inadequate, it seemed, to describe the trench experience. Words like *courage*, let alone *glory* and

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<sup>7</sup> corses: an archaic form of “corpses”

*heroism*, with their classical and romantic connotations, simply had no place in any accounts of what made soldiers stay and function in the trenches. (218)

While the narrator finds that past legend can no longer function, he is not willing quite yet to give up any hope of making meaning out of the Belgians' doomed defense of their homeland. The following section, section IV, opens with a meditation on this "strange new beauty" brought about by the war and the Belgians' sacrifice:

With no especial legends of marchings or triumphs or duty,  
Assuredly that is the way of it,  
The way of beauty... (65-67)

The Belgians, argues the narrator, did not have a martial history, a tradition of heroism, to account for their bravery. The image of the ugly man in the rain returns, now seeming to herald the birth of Belgium's own heroic tradition:

[...] the thought of the gloom and the rain  
And the ugly coated figure, standing beside a drain,  
Shall eat itself into your brain:  
And you will say of all heroes: 'They fought like the Belgians!'  
And you will say: 'He wrought like a Belgian his fate out of gloom,'  
And you will say: 'He bought like a Belgian his doom.' (71-76)

While, as with the first two appearances of the nameless Belgian hero, the specter of doom remains close to him, the narrator this time attempts to push beyond it:

And that shall be an honourable name;  
'Belgian' shall be an honourable word,  
As honourable as the fame of the sword,

As honourable as the mention of the many-chorded lyre,

And his old coat shall seem as beautiful as the fabrics woven in Tyre.

(77-81)

With the repetitive phrasing and accolades, the narrator attempts to invest directly into the Belgian experience what he was unable to do through the recalling of heroic legend and tradition.

Such an attempt, however, is threatened by what follows in section V. Here, the narrator returns to the subject of his incomprehension towards the Belgians' willing sacrifice expressed in the opening section of the poem. "And what in the world did they bear it for?" he repeatedly asks (87, 89), recalling the destruction visited on them by the Germans for daring to resist when they could have simply "let the legions pass through their woods" (91-96). The narrator considers nationalism – "Was it just love of their land?" – as a possible motivation, but even this raises disbelief: "Can any man so love his land?" (98-100).

The poem changes location between sections V and VI, the final section. The first five sections are all located, in subject and image, in Belgium; the war is an active presence, and the death it brings an ever-present threat. As section V comes to a close, the narrator can still not answer the haunting question from the beginning: in the name of God how could they do it?

The sixth section of "In October, 1914 (Antwerp)" opens at Charing Cross in London. It is the site of Belgian refugees who have fled their homeland and the continent from the German invasion, and it is the most urban setting of the poem's six sections. It shares with Eliot's poem two primary images or themes: the urban crowd and the vague relation between life and death within that crowd. "This is Charing Cross; / It is midnight" (104-105)

observes the narrator as the section begins, “There is a great crowd [...] all black that hardly whispers aloud” (106-108). From this mass of humanity the narrator singles out an individual figure:

Surely, that is a dead woman – a dead mother!

She has a dead face;

She is dressed all in black;

She wanders to the bookstall and back,

At the back of the crowd;

And back again and again back,

She sways and wanders. (109-115)

Within the imagery of the crowd, life and death overlap and become confused, paralleling how the distinction between crowd and individual also breaks down: while the imagery keeps returning to the massed crowds, it cannot mask the alienation of the individuals within them. A “great cloud” and “Immense shafts of shadows” cover a “black crowd / That hardly whispers aloud” (118-119). The crowd is simultaneously both living and dead:

And now!..That is another dead mother,

And there is another and another and another..

And little children, all in black,

All with dead faces, waiting in all the waiting-places,

Wandering from the doors of the waiting-room

In the dim gloom. (121-126)

*The Waste Land*, in its imagery of the undone crowd near the end of “The Burial of Dead,” also utilizes the urbanized masses as a space where the living and the dead, the individual and the crowd, are intermixed, their borders vague and unsettling:

Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.  
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (60-65)

The central image of this passage, the flowing crowd, is observed by the narrator using two allusions (lines 63-64) to passages in Dante’s *Inferno*; both lines appropriate images Dante sees in his passage from the Gates of Hell (Canto III) into the first circle of Hell (Canto IV). With this brief intrusion of Dante’s Hell into the “Unreal City,” the urban masses of the modern city are linked to classical images of anguish and death; it also connects to Christian concepts of the afterlife, as if the inhabitants of postwar London too have passed from a living world into Hell.

Such a condition of being in Limbo, the first stage of Dante’s Hell, also infuses a scene in “A Game of Chess” between a husband and wife engaged in a failing conversation (and marriage). The narrator listens impassively as his wife pleads with him to communicate:

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
 “What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
 “I never know what you are thinking. Think.” (112-114)

The narrator, however, is preoccupied with images of death. His response to his wife's command to "Think" is to observe that they are in "rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones" (115-116). When asked later to "remember" he recalls a line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (125). This is Eliot's second usage of the image, the first occurring in the Madame Sosostris passage of "The Burial of the Dead" where it is used to describe the Tarot card of the "drowned Phoenician Sailor" (47-48). The image of this sailor, in turn, forms the basis of *The Waste Land's* fourth section, "Death by Water."

This image of a dead man with pearls for eyes invokes a paralyzing memory in the husband. After the invocation of the dead sailor, the man is unable to interact with his wife. Until he attempts to drown her out with a snippet from a popular jazz tune (127-130), the husband's responses are interior monologues. His response to her demand of "What shall we ever do?," attempts to force order upon the scene:

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (135-138)



## V. PERSONAL GRIEF AND CULTURAL ANXIETY

### The Pity of War

It is tempting to read *The Waste Land* as a poem that ends in cultural paralysis, filled with characters that cannot do or say anything in response to the social and cultural shocks of the Great War. Such a reading, however, overlooks the extent to which *The Waste Land* sought to overcome the trauma of the war, to provide an example by which people could reclaim their social and cultural inheritance, allowing them to progress forward both individually and collectively. The poem, in its cultural appropriations, moved beyond being a passive lamentation and pointed towards a cultural reclamation. The central question raised by the war poets had been the difficulty of finding meaning in their experiences, if the suffering and sacrifice of the soldiers had held true value, or if they had become empty gestures amidst the chaotic and massive scales of death. Owen had asked of "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" ("Anthem" 1), and we have seen the narrator of Ford's poem question, in shock, "How could they do it?" Sandra Gilbert argues that Owen's opening question in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" was a declaration of "the bankruptcy of both religion *and* genre as sources of comfort" (188). She quotes Owen's own belief that his elegies were "'in no sense consolatory'" to his generation (qtd. in Gilbert 188). Unable to access traditional forms of mourning literature, the war poets struggled to find a new means of expressing their trauma and grief, a struggle shared by Eliot during the composition of *The Waste Land*. Gilbert argues that the war poets developed, among others, three key strategies in regards to their poetry: they focused on the "scene of dying," the landscape of death and the (dead) body itself, and provided a "retelling of the past" in response to the inability of

combatants to connect or situate their suffering within Western tradition (188-189). For Gilbert, the resultant poetry was essentially a form of testimonial (188).

In *The Waste Land* we find a similar inability to place the Great War into traditional poetic forms, and like much of the contemporary war poetry, it connected the shock, grief, and desire to mourn over the deaths of individuals to a larger cultural shock and anxiety. In "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen states that the classical patriotism of dying for one's country is nothing but a lie that has misled children "ardent for some desperate glory" (26). In another poem, "S.I.W.," the need to reassure the patriotism of a civilian family leads soldiers to a bitterly-ironic lie over the nature of their son's death. And in "Strange Meeting," the narrator believes that the combatant countries have learned nothing from the horrors of the Great War, that they shall continue to "trek from progress" as they wall themselves up into "vain citadels that are not walled" (29, 33). The narrator of Ford's "In October, 1914, (Antwerp)" had sought to locate the source of the Belgian's willingness to sacrifice themselves in either their own national history or in a shared European history of military courage and glory, yet he could find no such explanation for what he had witnessed, and the poem ends not in the revelry of the defenders' glory but in the bleak exile of Belgian refugees.

Yet even in such darkness, the poets still sought out the possibility of finding closure, if not redemption; they struggled to move past despair and find ways of creating a poetic meaning amidst the ruin and loss. While Ford's narrator cannot find historical sources, he does hope that what has happened in 1914 can be the start of some new form of tradition: "'Belgian' shall be an honourable word" he hopes (78). The hope is tentative and unsure, threatened by the constant presence of the ugliness the War wrought upon the land and the

men who fought upon it, yet it nevertheless is present. In "Insensibility," Owen cursed those who allowed themselves to become "dullards whom no cannon stuns" (50). Owen famously defined his poetry as being based on "the pity of war"; the poetry, in fact, was to be found in the pity (Owen 192). Pity was not simply a passive or paralyzed response to the trauma of the Great War: it was, perhaps, the only thing that could redeem it. Owen found meaning in pity: for him, it meant that men could still meaningfully connect with one another in what he called "The eternal reciprocity of tears" ("Insensibility" 59). The experience of the Great War had thrown Western tradition into crisis, but such crisis did not preclude the possibility of a new tradition emerging.

### **Tradition and *The Waste Land***

The narrators of *The Waste Land* expressed fears and anxieties very similar to the ones being expressed in the poetry of Ford and Owen, and they too sought ways in which the horror of the War and the bleakness of the postwar years could be overcome. Eliot's poem concerned itself with what future Europe would (or could) have in a postwar world of economic and political turmoil that even the War's victors themselves fell victim to. As Sandra Gilbert states, the War had exploded what she calls a *blutbruderschaft*, the sense of a shared European community of values, ideas, and history (190).

In order to understand Eliot's understanding (and undertaking) of such a project, it is useful to examine his critical thoughts of the post-war period and discover how they illuminate the philosophy and world-view of *The Waste Land*. Eliot's most important critical work, in this regard, is his well-known essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this work, Eliot focused on the problematic nature of tradition in the realm of English literature,

arguing that tradition serves as a poet's way of locating his work within the larger framework of a nation's tradition. The "individual talent" of the poet becomes the medium through which artistic creation is performed. In understanding the dialectical relationship between poet and tradition that Eliot created in the essay, we can move closer to understanding how *The Waste Land* sought to create new meaning from the fragmented ruins of post-war European culture.

Eliot's central argument in the essay was that tradition is not blindly handed down, with the new generation in "timid adherence" to its elders (48-49). "Tradition," he wrote, "is a matter of much wider significance," a matter which can only be obtained "by great labour" (49). This led to Eliot's notion of a poet's "historical sense," the sense of the immediacy of prior poets and their works regardless of this historical distance between them and the modern poet (49). This sense, according to Eliot, allows the poet to understand his relation to tradition while neither being overwhelmed or alienated from it. One way such a balancing is accomplished lies in Eliot's belief that new art creates reinterpretations of prior works (49-50). While the existing tradition possesses an "ideal" order before a new work is introduced, such an order remains complete after it is "readjusted" in response to the new work's integration (50). Thus, while the individual poet is distinct from the tradition – the tradition was already "full" and "complete" before his contribution – the poet is also absorbed by the tradition's continuous completeness, its ability to seamlessly integrate new works and place them in relation to prior ones (50).

In *After Ontology: Literary Theory and Modernist Poetics*, William D. Melaney argues that Eliot's "emphasis on the capacity of the work of art to destabilize a preexisting canon [...] can be linked to his daring use of the literary tradition as an archeological value"

(154). Eliot's personal, creative experience of tradition, his use and reworking of it, can be found in his critical conception of the relationship between poet and art, the new and the old. For Eliot, the individual mind became less important than the social one, or what he terms the "mind of Europe" ("Tradition" 51). This belief of his was formed, in part, by the notion that "art never improves" (51). To Eliot, the continual change of the European mind, the change wrought by each new work's affect on what came before, is indicative of a process of "refinement," the development in poets of an "awareness of the past" which brings them into a better understanding of the past than the past itself could offer (51-52). Eliot's interpretation posits change not as a sign of individual genius but of the poet's ability to tap into his nation's tradition.

For Eliot, the poet's role was to act as a medium in which tradition – specifically in his case the English tradition – was to be crafted and refined down throughout the ages. Inheriting a tradition which was not given but earned, it would be the poet's mission to submit his personal mind to the larger, historical, and social "mind" of his culture. In doing so, Eliot argued, poets will become "conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living" ("Tradition" 59). Such a task carries a heavy burden: the poet must be aware, Eliot states, that he will "inevitably be judged by the standards of the past" (50). The appropriation of classical works in his allusions and quotations, writes William D. Melaney, reminded Eliot "of his own dependency on a tradition that sometimes overwhelm[ed] him" (154).

In examining Eliot's conception of "tradition" as a dynamic relationship between poet and tradition, one can see that its fundamental underlying elements match closely Hegel's concept of the *dialectic*. As Terry Pinkard notes, the basic strategies of philosophy when

problems arise are to either choose one side as the correct one or to demonstrate that no problem exists in the first place (5). Hegel, Pinkard argues, opted for just such a strategy:

Hegelian dialectic is the attempt to show that some apparently incompatible basic set of categories (or the basic categories of seemingly incompatible philosophies) can actually be shown to be compatible when they are put in the context of a larger set of categories. (5-6)

What informed Hegel's conception of the dialectic, according to Pinkard, is the distinction made between what Hegel called "understanding" and "reason": understanding gives us knowledge of what makes a thing unique or distinct, reason the knowledge of how it fits into a larger whole (6). "Reason," writes Pinkard, "looks at ideas in terms of their inferential links to other ideas" (19). "By looking only at individual propositions," he notes, "the understanding cannot do this; it ends up affirming contradictory concepts" (19). The Hegelian dialectic, then, can be seen as a process of moving from understanding to reason, as the thesis and antithesis of understanding merge into the synthesis of reason.

Eliot himself had adopted a dialectical perspective on life during his study of the philosopher F.H. Bradley as a graduate student. In his dissertation, Eliot wrote that

The life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater and less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them. (qtd. in Levenson 191)

Eliot's conception of tradition as outlined in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* can be seen as having followed this Hegelian model of dialectical process in the synthesis of

“Art” (the poet and his work) and “History” (the tradition or canon preceding the poet) into “Tradition.” From the point of view of “understanding,” individual works may not seemingly cohere or connect to each other, but if the poet has developed a capable reason, he may understand how all art synthesizes into a Tradition. Eliot’s presentation of how the poet (should) interact with the tradition, in other words, works very much like a Hegelian reconciliation between the poet’s work and the body or canon of tradition; just as thesis and antithesis synthesize, so too does the new work become integrated into the tradition, each revising the other as this integration takes place. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot argues that the poet must be judged by the past, a judgment Eliot defined as “a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other” (50). It is not an issue simply of the new work conforming to the old standard: art that conforms, he wrote, is not new, and thus is not even art (50).

The key element of Eliot’s concept of tradition that a comparison to Hegel’s dialectic brings forth is its permeability, its openness to change. Tradition is not a fragile, unbending force constantly threatened by change (and therefore in need of defense from an elitist, reactionary Eliot); tradition is instead a dynamic force, kept in continuous flux as it absorbs new artists and their art. “The picture of knowledge that emerges in Hegel’s theory,” writes Terry Pickard, “is not that of a secure and minimal foundation with everything resting squarely on it but rather that of descriptions being embedded in larger patterns of meaning” (104). For Eliot, received tradition destabilized itself – however briefly – at the moment when the new poet, the new poetry, was synthesized into the tradition. This malleability was captured vividly in Eliot’s image of the “existing monuments” of tradition being readjusted by the introduction of new art (“Tradition” 50). Adherents to such a conception of the

relationship between poet and tradition, wrote Eliot, “will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (50). Tradition and its “knowledge,” then, are not fixed but open: for Eliot, tradition would not be desirable or meaningful if it was simply a matter of “blind or timid adherence” to what one has received (48).

*The Waste Land*’s use of allusion and quotation, then, can be viewed not simply as a lament for what has been lost, but as an experiment, an attempt, at what can be created amongst the remnants of the old order. In many ways, what Eliot attempted in *The Waste Land*’s cultural workings was to restore the lost “aura” of European culture.

### **“A heap of broken images”**

As Europe staggered out of the Great War, its culture was in ruins. As Modris Eksteins comments in *Rites of Spring*:

Europe slumped into a monumental melancholy. The homes promised its heroes remained fictional palaces, and the utopian social dreams evoked by wartime rhetoric were brutally erased by inflation, unemployment, and widespread deprivation, not to mention an influenza epidemic that ravaged the world in 1918-1919 and killed more people than the war itself. (253)

One result of such an aftermath was a movement Modris Eksteins refers to as a “new conservatism,” one whose task “was not to conserve but to rebuild” (255). For Eliot, the use of traditional works in *The Waste Land* was such a rebuilding or, perhaps more accurately, reclamation. For the post-war generation of poets and readers to be able to access the tradition in the dialectical manner he outlines in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot



realized that the canon – the collective works of tradition – must recapture what Benjamin referred to as the “aura” art held before mass production.<sup>8</sup> For Eliot, what destroyed this cultural aura was the industrialization of modern life, from the streets and factories of the city to the gas and machine gun of the trench. It was this same industrialization that had ultimately destroyed the aura of heroic language for poets such as Ford and Owen. If one had experienced the war, observed the narrator of Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est,” one could no longer ascribe to traditional forms of patriotic or nationalistic belief. The old order that had relied on the heroic narratives of history had fallen into ruins – “for you know only / A heap of broken images” accused one narrator in *The Waste Land* (21-22); “I can connect / Nothing with nothing” lamented another (301-302). With the loss of the old order, under the shadow of the Allies’ “victory,” had come even more strife and uncertainty: the German, Austrian-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires were broken apart; Imperial Russia had been replaced by a Bolshevik state that encouraged further communist uprisings throughout Europe; and even the victors were left reeling from post-war inflation, workers’ strikes, and shortages. The old narratives had collapsed, and people were left unable, writes Modris

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<sup>8</sup> “Aura” is used here in a sense similar to that used by Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin, in his essay, writes of how works of art lose authenticity – their “aura” – as the technologies of modern industry allowed for the replacement of a unique “original” with mass reproductions. Technology in another form – the horrific weapons unleashed in the Great War – also stripped away another form of aura: that which might be called the authenticity or authority of culture (such as in the postwar dominance of ironic language as discussed by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a phenomena Fussell directly attributes to the civilian and combat experiences of the war and its attendant propaganda). Eliot’s use of quotation and reference, synthesis and contrast, in my opinion, is a way of restoring a cultural “aura” through the unique and original images and voices these strategies created in *The Waste Land*. For Eliot, then, the greatest threat of the War was not necessarily in its fragmentation of old models, but in its threat towards the production of anything new. In Eliot’s dialectical sense of tradition, what is needed by the poet or the artist is the ability to create new art, because it is in the synthesis of the new with the old that Eliot’s concept of “the tradition” becomes a dynamic and accessible source for the modern poet to draw upon. As Susan Buck-Morss notes, “poetic ‘originality’ [is] no less the victim of the loss of ‘aura’ than [are] the mass articles of industrial production” (193). For Eliot, the ability to synthesize traditional works into unique new forms becomes the primary means of such “poetic originality” in the modern poet.

Eksteins, “to answer the fundamental question of the meaning of life” – a question, he adds, which “the war posed [...] brutally in nine million cases” (256).

To revitalize old works, Eliot turned towards radically recontextualizing them. Classical works could be presented in modern scenes, casting the combatants and urban survivors of the Great War in classical roles: the narratives of history could be performed in the present. Gallipoli became (re-)known as Mylae (70), while a young man of postwar London is watched by a Tiresias who recalls the ancient siege of Thebes (215-248). Eliot himself, perhaps, appeared in such a role as a narrator (or the “voice” or “presence” behind her, for she is usually identified as female) in “The Fire Sermon”:

“On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.  
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing.” (300-305)

Margate was the location of a seaside resort Eliot went to in October of 1921 to begin a rest-cure; it was here that he began in earnest the drafting and redrafting of the bulk of *The Waste Land*. Its mention in the poem is unsteady and unsure, the narrator speaking in clipped sentences that come near to being a voiced interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness speaking.

This confession of a personal failure to make meaning is followed by a nervous “la la,” as if the narrator wishes to soften or repudiate this sudden revelation with a laugh. It is

followed quickly by a passage from Augustine's *Confessions* and a chant adapted from both the *Confessions* and the Buddha's Fire Sermon:

To Carthage then I came  
 Burning burning burning burning  
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
 O Lord Thou pluckest  
 burning (307-311)

The narrator seeks not only to hide behind the masks of Augustine and the Buddha, however. His desire is to access the meaning they still contain for his own lived experience.

Drawing the allusion into a personal narrative connects the classical material – classical narratives, as they were – with post-war Europe. While the existential crisis the narrator faced came in the wake of the Great War, it was nevertheless one shared to some degree by the ancients. Both Augustine and the Buddha had become alienated, after religious or enlightening experiences, from worlds they had once known, and while the poem's experience of alienation is very different from the two men it references – the poem's comes not from the *awakening* of faith (or enlightenment) but from its *loss* – the modern resetting of these ancient tales of spiritual alienation helped to provide *The Waste Land* with a revitalizing force by opening these narratives into something still accessible to modern man. Just as Eliot's concept of tradition involved the old order adapting to the inclusion of new works, so too did it concede the necessity for tradition to remake itself in order to incorporate new experience. The Great War had cut-off modern Europe from its own classical tradition, and if both poets and readers were to once again authentically connect with it, tradition needed to find a way to incorporate the Great War itself. By merging past and present with

varying formulations, Eliot (and the narrators of *The Waste Land*) sought to reinvigorate tradition by moving it close to the heart of modern experience.

### **The Divine Waste Land of Dante Alighieri**

One of the most important sources for *The Waste Land*'s allusions is Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. By the time of the poem's final composition and publication in 1922, Eliot already possessed a deep and lengthy familiarity with the work – he would later, in 1929, write a book on Dante for a "Poets on the Poets" series for Faber & Faber. In his early college years (before 1910) Eliot read Dante's work in the original Italian, using an English prose translation as a guide; he preferred the *Inferno* over the *Paradiso* (due to what he felt was the latter's "cheerfulness" and optimism) and memorized particular sections that he found moving or pleasing (Perkins 491-492). By 1920 this early distaste had turned into a beginning appreciation for the final book of *The Divine Comedy*, possibly indicating that the cheerfulness he once found unpleasant had now become desirable (Perkins 523).

Dante's work is referenced at least five times in *The Waste Land*: twice in "The Burial of the Dead" (lines 63, 64); once in "The Fire Sermon" (293-294); and twice in "What the Thunder Said" (412, 428). A sixth can be added if one includes Eliot's dedication to Ezra Pound as "el miglior fabbro." Perhaps more importantly than these specific allusions is Eliot's borrowing of a general narrative structure from *The Divine Comedy*, one based on travel and observation, guiding the reader through a collection of urban scenes and attempted visions. While *The Waste Land* is not generally believed to have a single narrator<sup>9</sup> like *The*

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<sup>9</sup> One of the most prominent modern critics who do argue for a singular narrator is Calvin Bedient; in *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, Bedient argues that the multiple narrators within the poem act as masks for the real narrator, who remains largely outside the poem.

*Divine Comedy*, and is not as explicit in its religious themes, it does share the great work's emphasis on taking the reader through a spiritual journey, albeit one that never leaves the human world for a supernatural one.

According to Eliot's notes for *The Waste Land*, Tiresias was the central or most important narrator of the work. Critically, Tiresias' presence in "The Fire Sermon" has traditionally been seen in the light of his experience of having lived as both male and female. Eliot's own comment, in note 218, that in Tiresias all other personages in the poem are united (*The Waste Land* 23), generally supports such an emphasis on this element of the Tiresian mythos.

I believe, however, that the primary importance of his presence in *The Waste Land* is his knowledge of death and the afterlife, having walked in Hades amongst "the lowest of the dead" in reference to scenes from *The Odyssey* and other Greek myths. For *The Waste Land*, and in particular the "Fire Sermon" section, Tiresias serves a role similar to Virgil's in the *Inferno* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: he is our guide through Hell. Other than the narrator of "Death by Water," Tiresias is *The Waste Land's* lone narrator who can fully see what has happened: there is a distance in his voice, a detachment, that gives his observation of the meeting between the typist and the "young man carbuncular" an authority and stability that the other narrators lack (and unlike the narrator of "Death by Water," Tiresias enters the poem as a character himself in his repeated use of "I" and his recollection of the Theban dead).

Tiresias' opening claim is that, despite blindness and being caught "between two lives," he retains the ability to "see / At the violet hour, the evening hour" (218-220). This "evening hour" not only signals the end of the urban business day, it also echoes the opening

of the *Inferno*, in which Virgil comes upon Dante as night falls. After announcing himself, Tiresias then guides us through a scene of a modern sexual tryst, rape, or relationship. By this point in *The Waste Land*, we have already witnessed several failed sexual and intimate encounters, including the husband and wife in "A Game of Chess"; in this encounter between the typist and the young man, however, we are given a guide in Tiresias who mediates the scene using carefully-chosen descriptions which serve to enhance the sense of sterility or emptiness of life in the "Unreal City."

The typist, for example, is described by Tiresias only in terms of her belongings. We are given no actual physical description of her: the closest is a reference to her smoothing her hair, which indicates only that it is disheveled (nothing of its length or color). Instead, we are given general descriptions of the apartment she lives in (and its furniture) as well as the clothes she has laid out to dry (222-227). We are also given little of the typist's mental or emotional state: while Tiresias does state that she is "bored and tired" (236), her relationship or attitude towards the man remains vague, seeming neither fully romantic nor fully an assault or rape, a vagueness formulated in the observation that his "caresses" are "unreproved, if undesired" (238). While the encounter does not appear to have been desired by the woman, who expresses relief when it's over (252), her passivity is described as one of "indifference" rather than fear or an inability to resist (242).

The young man, similarly, is given only a few physical details – most notably his being afflicted by infected boils ("carbuncular"). The most loaded description given to him is indirect, when he is described as a small clerk "on whom assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire" (233-234). The reference to Bradford is generally perceived as an elitist remark: as editor Michael North comments in a note on the term, Bradford was a

manufacturing town and any millionaire from it would have been seen as “nouveau riche” (*The Waste Land* 13). Given the context of the poem’s composition and publication after the Great War, however, an added dimension to the term has been noted by some critics: as Robert DiYanni points out in his own notes on *The Waste Land*, Bradford manufacturers “were reputed to have profited handsomely from [the] war industry in World War I” (note 13). As D.S.R. Welland comments, soldiers themselves were familiar with the reputation of such corporations: he quotes from a letter by Wilfred Owen dated July, 1918, regarding “all the stinking Leeds and Bradford war-profiteers now reading *John Bull*” (qtd. in Welland 56). Welland states that “these cloth-manufacturers, who had made fortunes from providing the Government with military uniforms at inflated prices, were a familiar symbol of profiteering” (56-57).

The young man’s sin, then, is perhaps not that he is simply without aristocratic bloodlines or grooming, but that he is one – or is one who is reminiscent of the kind – who has exploited or taken advantage of the Great War and its aftermath. His “assault” on the typist, as vague and complex as the scene makes it, can at least, in part, be read as a metaphor or allegory for what the Great War has done to European culture. In such a reading, the shock and attempted recovery from the encounter in lines 249-256 may be seen as Eliot’s summary of Europe’s failed attempt to (culturally) recover from the war:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
“well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”  
When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone. (249-256)

The self-examination of looking into the glass leads not into enlightenment but a possible attempt at repressing the memory of the “departed lover.” The only direct responses to the encounter is a relief that it’s done with and her subsequent attempt to return to normal activity; the act of smoothing her hair and playing music, however, is as detached and artificial (“automatic”) as the technology of the gramophone she turns to. So too, perhaps, is Eliot commenting on any initial attempt by Europe to culturally return to normalcy: the war has so severed the past from the present that any attempt to return to a pre-war normalcy is fraudulent, requiring a total repression of the war experience and a forced, almost mechanical enjoyment of the remnant culture.



## VI. THE LONDON OF "MUDCRACKED HOUSES"

Traditionally, the final section of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said," has been interpreted as a prophetic vision, an attempt to fulfill the mythic narratives interwoven throughout the text, to bring a kind of epic or mythic closure to the raw wounds of the Great War. Such interpretations not only serve to support the two primary texts Eliot claimed inspiration from in composing *The Waste Land* – Frazier's *The Golden Bough* and Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* – but they also function to create a sense of closure to the poem itself. It may not necessarily be either a redemptive or tragic resolution, but such readings do give a sense of unifying purpose. If the themes and anxieties that populate *The Waste Land* are not worked out, they are at least worked through: what at first may appear disordered and chaotic can at last be ordered and mapped, the everyday lives of its characters – with all their doubts, failures, impotence, follies, and isolation – transcended by the mythic narratives such interpretations locate in them.

While such readings are not wholly without merit, what one finds at the end of *The Waste Land* is not so removed from what one finds at its beginning. London – as location, as image, as a collective voice of its own – never leaves Eliot's poem. Neither does the War. In "What the Thunder Said," the reader is confronted with the poem's final, anxious narrations on what the rise of modern urban life and four years of mechanized war has inflicted upon the citizens of London. The images and themes of *The Waste Land* are not neatly resolved in this final section: the anxieties are irreducible, the narrative shock of what has been witnessed and experienced not yet overcome. "What the Thunder Said" is ultimately an allegorical meditation on this shock, an exploration of the bleak future that initially haunted the postwar European mind in the immediate shadow of the Great War.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye argued that modern poetic imagery is both “ironic and anti-allegorical,” and that it exists in several forms:

One is the typical symbol of the metaphysical school of the Baroque period, the “conceit” or deliberately strained union of normally disparate things. The paradoxical techniques of metaphysical poetry are based on a sense of the breakdown of the internal relation of art and nature into an external one. Another is the substitute-image of *symbolisme*, part of a technique for suggesting or evoking things and avoiding the explicit naming of them. Still another is the kind of image described by Mr. Eliot as an objective correlative, the image that sets up an inward focus of emotion in poetry and at the same time substitutes itself for an idea. (91-92)

Frye argued that such techniques are anti-allegorical because they are “consistent with the modern literal view of art,” a view which he defined as “the sense of the poem as [being] withdrawn from explicit statement” (91). For Frye, modern poetic imagery invokes only itself, its dependence on irony and paradox disallowing either internal resolution or any form of relation or connection beyond the external.

This conception of modern poetics, however, is not wholly accurate in regards to Eliot’s own poetics. In the essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” Eliot himself defined his concept of the “objective correlative” as being

a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Karr 141)

This definition turns upon Eliot's conception of the objective correlative as being an essentially allegorical process: in its *evocation* of a desired or targeted emotional response, the objective correlative functions as a form of allegory, where "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" does not end in its literal meaning, but is opened up to additional ones.

Eliot's description of the process as being an evocative one is important: as something which evokes something else, the purpose of a poetic image within an objective correlative is not to replace, as Frye suggests, *but to be replaced*. For Eliot, an idea or emotion is not properly – that is, fully or accurately – reproducible within the confines of poetic language and imagery: to express what Eliot sees as being otherwise inexpressible, the poet must overcome the limits of "sensory experience" through allegorical formulas where that which *can* be represented evokes that which *cannot*.

With this allegorical sense in mind, one may see that much of the imagery and themes in "What the Thunder Said" serve as objective correlatives of both the War and London. The desert that fills "What the Thunder Said" is not only a desert, but a dark echo of both London and the trenches, after the War: the physical destruction and spiritual aridness remains, but the trenches are no longer inhabited. The great crowds that filled the city in *The Waste Land*'s opening sections are gone, and with them the soldiers that had filled wartime London: the influx of soldiers from throughout the Empire and allied Nations as well as those come home for personal or medical leaves. Physical remnants of the War's destruction, the moon-like landscapes of no man's land and the towns and villages destroyed by years of near-constant shelling, become the "empty chapels" abandoned to the forces of nature. The desert of "What the Thunder Said" is the imaginative space in which the war itself is folded into the city, where the image of the trench becomes the image of the street.

Throughout this section, we find in its imagery echoes of prior depictions of London, especially from “The Burial of the Dead.” The section’s opening passage takes the form of a summary:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces  
 After the frosty silence in the gardens  
 After the agony in stony places  
 The shouting and the crying  
 Prison and palace and reverberation  
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains (322-327)

The first location given is of gardens, an image that, however briefly, recalls two scenes from “The Burial of the Dead”: the opening scene of the Hofgarten (lines 8-11) and the scene of the hyacinth girl (35-42). The next location, of “stony places,” recalls a narrator’s rebuke, also in the opening section, of “what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” (19-20). “Prison and palace,” while not referencing specific locations, hint at the urban presence that lies beneath the images of desolate earth.

The second stanza of “What the Thunder Said” echoes the “heap of broken images” in “The Burial of the Dead.” In its repeated emphasis of the dry and sterile nature of the narrator’s location, where there “is no water but only rock” (331), the passage echoes the accusing lament one now knows only of ruin,

[...] where the sun beats,  
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
 And the dry stone no sound of water. (22-24)

The lack of water serves to contrast both London and the War: the dryness of uninhabited nature compared to the chaotic life of city populaces and the swamp-like mud of no man's land and the water-filled trenches. The absence of water in this section is allegorical: it is not water itself whose absence is painfully known by the narrators of "What the Thunder Said," but the loss of friends, relatives, and loved ones.

The next location shift in "What the Thunder Said" takes us into the mountains. It is inferred that this setting is meant to represent a failed attempt at solitude and contemplation, for the narrator finds that "one can neither stand nor lie nor sit":

There is not even silence in the mountains  
 But dry sterile thunder without rain  
 There is not even solitude in the mountains  
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
 From doors of mudcracked houses (340-345)

Although the setting initially appears to be a natural one, set somewhere in a remote location, we instead find a human presence that cannot be escaped. The presence of faces, which are both distant and close, echoes (but only echoes) the image of the urban crowd, while their placement in "mudcracked houses" echoes images of the trench. City and trench are both filled with the "dry sterile thunder" of automobiles, vendors, trains, artillery, machine guns, and airplanes.

In its allegorical contemplations of barrenness, "What the Thunder Said" is not a physical journey into the wilderness but a spiritual journey inwards. To reference Eliot's concept of the objective correlative, the images of "What the Thunder Said" serve as formulas for evoking the anxieties and fears of what life would be like after "the agony in

stony places.” The physical features of this barren land: its dryness, the ruins of civilization amidst the strong natural images of desert, mountain, and, later, the Himavant (Himalayas) and the jungles of the Ganges River, serve as allegories of the physical, spiritual, and cultural loss wrought by the War. The masses, once flowing upon the bridges of London, now huddle within the earth, their presence not materially but psychologically felt, sensed not by their bodies but by their gazes. Dehumanized, they scuttle across the wastes as if they were now nothing more than insects or vermin. The land is now dominated by a silence which is broken only by a rustling wind and the tolling of “reminiscent” bells.

Such a use of desolate natural images to reflect both an urban setting and an inward spiritual meditation is used earlier in *The Waste Land*: “The Fire Sermon” opened on the banks of the Thames, where amidst the debris left from a party of the city’s young heirs and nymphs a narrator invoked images of a rest-cure at Lake Geneva and the lamentation of the Israelites in Psalm 137 in narrating his own desolation (173-184). Isolation, in both its physical and mental forms – as solitude and alienation – becomes a space within which the narrator(s) of *The Waste Land* seek to find expression for their traumas and anxieties.

Immediately following the narrator’s complaints of the lack of water, silence, or solitude, we are shifted in “What the Thunder Said” to a passage that synthesizes two distinct allusions. The passage opens with a question, one that is absent quotation marks, an absence that in prior sections indicates that this is not a spoken question but one that is being thought: “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” (359). Eliot’s notes on *The Waste Land* indicate that this question, and the explanatory lines that follow it (360-365), were “stimulated” by an account of an Antarctic expedition in which members of the party reported suffering a similar experience to what the narrator expresses: of sensing or seeing a

person who does not actually exist (see note 360, *The Waste Land* 25). Such a haunting presence by an unknown or non-existent body not only recalls the planted corpse in "The Burial of the Dead," it also forms a basis for an allusion to a passage in the Gospel of Luke<sup>10</sup> of the resurrected Christ's appearance to two men who do not initially recognize him:

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (Luke 24:13-16)

This image of an unknown companion, unrecognized but whose presence is felt, serves as a personification of the human and cultural losses in the Great War. In its context as an allusion to an Antarctic expedition, it represents the mental breakdown of men under extreme duress; in its context as a biblical allusion, it represents a loss of faith. The unknown traveler becomes not a savior but a reminder of the corpseless dead the war created: Eliot's Antarctic explanation implies the traveler is a hallucination, a presence without a body, an absence that will be shared by many of the swarming hordes in no man's land.

In the Gospel of Luke, the initial ignorance of the men to the true nature of their companion is eventually replaced by realization and joy when Jesus offers them communion (Luke 24:30-31). In *The Waste Land*, such resolution is difficult. The Great War was not to the war to end all wars, nor make the world safe for democracy, a bitter truth that some, such as Keynes, a mere year after hostilities ended.

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<sup>10</sup> The passage quoted is from The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV): Third Edition, Oxford University Press.

A narrator turns towards the mountains again, where “hooded hordes [swarm] / Over endless plains” (368-369), with a voice that seemingly betrays a personal sense of shock in its open-ended questioning and listing:

What is the city over the mountains

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal (371-376)

The narrative focus turns towards the cities that have been central to the development of Western culture and European history. The first three are “classical” in nature: Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jewish and Christian faiths; Athens, the birthplace (directly and through Rome) of much of the West’s poetic, philosophical, and political traditions; and Alexandria, a city made famous by a library whose eventual destruction by fire would result in the loss of immeasurable knowledge, much of it from the aforementioned cultures of “pagan” learning and Christian faith. These historical origins of Western culture are followed by two, much more contemporary cities: Vienna and London. Vienna for the narrator may have symbolized much in terms of culture and the arts; as the former capital of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Vienna could also be seen as a birthplace of the Great War. With its prominence as the financial center of the world, the very heart of the greatest of European empires in the century preceding the Great War, London is *the* city, the great metropolis and symbol of those forces – industrialization and urbanization, colonization and globalization – that had so transformed Europe and the West.



The narrator's summary ending of the passage with a disbelieving "Unreal," indicates the difficulty in coping with what has been lost; it also points toward a response that cannot be fully, or even adequately, expressed in poetic imagery or language. The cities emerge in his narrative unconsciously, and their listing – absent any detail or pause – gives the effect of a narrator suddenly living through once-repressed memories now bursting forth so intensely that he can only bear witness to them as they are loosened. It is a civilian shell-shock, the disbelief in seeing the great cities of Europe, historic and present, lying in ruins, the traditions they represent disemboweled by the same weapons and experiences that have killed almost ten million.

As "What the Thunder Said" pushes towards its denouement in the *Datta – Dayadhvam – Damyata* passage, two stanzas appear that together serve to synthesize London and the Great War. In the first of these two stanzas, the location given echoes darkly elements of London that have appeared earlier in *The Waste Land*. Bats "with baby faces," we are told,

[...] crawled head downward down a blackened wall

And upside down in air were towers

Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours

And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. (381-384)

The towers here recall the buildings and structures of London that populated the first three sections of *The Waste Land*, including London Bridge, the luxurious setting of the opening scene of "A Game of Chess," and the church of Magnus Martyr in "The Fire Sermon."

Described in "What the Thunder Said" as being upside down and in the air, the final section's image of this bat-filled city in the desert creates a visual inversion of the city of

London depicted earlier, and the tolling bells are indeed reminiscent, as they also invoke the London of Saint Mary Woolnoth's bells that "kept the hours / With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine" (67-68). The image of "empty cisterns and exhausted wells" continues the evocation of the Great War that occurs throughout the entire section, for what pits in the earth had become more exhausted than the trenches and the cities which fed them?

The nature of these tolling bells, in both sections, that "keep the hours" may also share a deeper allegorical significance: in Christian tradition, the hour of Jesus' death was said to have occurred in the ninth hour, either of the day or of His suffering. Three of the four gospels – Matthew 27:45-46, Mark 15:33-34, and Luke 23:44-46 – reference a ninth hour in their description of Jesus' suffering on the cross. Although the actual time of Jesus' death is unknown, its attribution in Christian tradition to the ninth hour may be the source for this "dead sound on the final stroke of nine."

The stanza following the "empty cisterns" passage connects images of the war's aftermath to these urban scenes. The scene is cloaked in language taken, according to Eliot, from Jessie Weston's description of the Chapel Perilous in *From Ritual to Romance*. According to Weston, the chapel served as the scene for "a strange and terrifying adventure" for the questing hero or heroine (*The Waste Land* 38). In the specific case of Gawain, the chapel served as a shelter from a terrible storm that eventually abated after he witnessed a mysterious hand extinguishing the chapel's light (39). In *The Waste Land*, this chapel is located in a "decayed hole" amidst "tumbled graves," housing only the wind, a place where "Dry bones can harm no one" (385-390). Such imagery invokes the cenotaphs raised to commemorate the dead who filled mass graves as well as the missing and unknown corpses that could not receive proper burials. While the imagery of *The Waste Land's* final section is

that of a barren wilderness, it is in fact London itself: "The Burial of the Dead" comes to a close in postwar London as two ex-soldiers recognize one another amidst the undone many, while "What the Thunder Said" opens in the dry remnants of the trenches and no man's land, the physical remnants of the Great War, where hordes of sullen faces are left to swarm over a barren land. It is the unreal city of *The Waste Land*, an urban London permeated with the experience of the trench.

## CONCLUSION

From postwar London to the trenches of the front, *The Waste Land* merged the urban and the trench, the civilian and the soldier. Within its five sections Eliot created a complex, deep response to the mental, physical, and cultural ruin the Great War wrought upon Europe. It is the war poem of a civilian who experienced the War deeply and intimately: it is an elegy for at least one dead friend, an anti-pastoral of the nightmare landscape of the trenches, and the expression of Eliot's numerous private and public anxieties over his and Europe's fate in a postwar future. It is a poem in which London becomes a site of the Great War, a city whose churches, bridges, and streets evoke memories and images of trenches, mud, and the bodies of the dead. In Ford's "In October, 1914, (Antwerp)," the War pushes its victims from the front to the city; in *The Waste Land*, the distinction between civilian and combatant is blurred: the crises of mourning and meaning which arose from the trenches arose also from the streets.

In the shock of the War's devastation, both soldier and civilian found received tradition incapable of expressing the grief and trauma the Great War produced, yet many still hoped for some strategy, some new form of poetry that could overcome such ruin. For Eliot, *The Waste Land* turned towards an avant-garde poetics, of allusion and quotation, collage and symbolism. Eliot conceived of "Tradition" as a mutable heritage, an inheritance not of closed histories but of a past still open and in dialogue with the present. The Great War had once seemed to threaten the very foundations of Western culture, but in *The Waste Land* one still finds voices singing out of the exhausted wells. It is a war poem that hopes for a future after war.

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